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Ex-CIA Agent Recalls Marcos' Rise to Power

Former Philippine Leader Described as Unscrupulous and 'Cagey' Years Ago

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HONOLULU—The Central Intelligence Agency had Ferdinand Marcos pegged as an unscrupulous politician years ago.

At least Joseph Burkholder Smith did. In 1959, Smith was the CIA officer in charge of a million-peso campaign to influence the Philippine elections on behalf of the agency's four favored candidates.

Marcos wasn't one of them, but the dynamic young politician came in first in the crucial Philippine Senate elections that year, to Smith's enduring chagrin. None of the four CIA-backed candidates—a "grand alliance" of men dedicated to bringing back honest government in the tradition of the late Philippine president Ramon Magsaysay—won a seat.

"I'm still bitter," Smith, now retired and living in Florida, said in a telephone interview. "If only we'd had the guts to stick by Magsaysay's boys. They were really quite different from the Marcos crowd, the landed elite."

The 1959 elections were a vital prelude to the presidential elections in the Philippines in the years ahead. Marcos' showing made him an up-and-coming prospect.

"1959 was a beauty contest," Smith said. "That made him presidential timber."

But as a CIA officer assigned to Manila in 1958, Smith did not trust Marcos from the first day they met: Saturday, July 11, 1959, according to "Portrait of a Cold Warrior," an autobiography Smith wrote after quitting the agency a decade ago.

"I felt he was a fairly cagey fellow with not a great deal of scruples," Smith said. "He played things very, very close to the chest."

The former CIA officer first met Marcos, then a Philippine congressman, when Marcos turned up to escort Smith to a meeting with Vice

President Diosdado Macapagal, the leader of the Philippine Liberal Party who was angling for the presidency in 1961.

Ostensibly a civilian employee with the 13th U.S. Air Force Southeast Regional Survey Unit, Smith had earned a reputation as "Mr. Substantial Support," the only man in the Philippines "authorized by the United States government to discuss political negotiations with anyone." Macapagal wanted to see him to discuss "how much money we would put into the campaign" for a ticket that would be mutually satisfactory.

What stuck in Smith's mind was how Marcos, who was running for the Senate with Macapagal's blessing, criticized Macapagal on the way to the meeting with him.

"If you just remember he [Macapagal] has an exaggerated opinion of himself and his own importance, you should be able to reason with him," Smith, in his book, quoted Marcos as saying. "We really want American help to win this election, and all of us really want a strong ticket. Also, we don't necessarily think Macapagal must be the presidential candidate in 1961. Only he does."

At that point, covert U.S. intervention in Philippine elections seems to have been widely accepted. According to Smith, it dated from 1951 when the CIA organized and funded NAMFREL (the National Movement for Free Elections) to help counter rampant corruption and to help educate the public on the importance of honest and free elections.

Partly as a result, Magsaysay won in 1953 by a landslide. "This is the way we like to see an election carried out," President Dwight D. Eisenhower told reporters.

A genuine reformer, Magsaysay put the Philippines on the path of real democracy, but he was killed in a plane crash outside Cebu City on March 17, 1957. The new president, Carlos Garcia, turned out to be thoroughly corrupt and at the

center of the same kind of payoff system that Marcos is now accused of, according to Smith.

In 1958, Smith was given succinct instructions: "Find another Magsaysay."

Smith saw the 1959 elections as a chance to repudiate Garcia and his allies. The Philippine senatorial race is run on a nationwide basis, and the candidate who got the most votes among those running for the eight seats at stake that year would automatically become "a national political leader, a potential president."

For run-of-the-mill candidates, election was important in another sense. The annual salary for a lawmaker was only 7,200 pesos, but the annual "pork barrel" bill available to each one would give them 250,000 to 500,000 pesos a year for "public improvements."

Some observers are convinced that Marcos was on the take early on. "We used to call him 'the godfather,'" Newsweek magazine recently quoted a retired Philippine general as saying. One of Marcos' first reported treasure troves was the tobacco industry in his home province.

According to Tomas (Buddy) Gomez III, a longtime Marcos critic here, Marcos also devoted himself in his early years as a congressman to serving on the import control committee and "selling import licenses" through his law office.

The CIA's Smith, in any case, said that he wanted no part of him. With the help of longtime Magsaysay lieutenant and NAMFREL organizer Jimmy Ferrer, Smith hit on the idea of a Progressive-Liberal coalition and wound up pinning his hopes on four candidates: Manuel Manahan, who had cleaned up Philippine Customs under Magsaysay; Emmanuel Pelaez, a Magsaysay supporter in the Senate; Raul Manglapus, former foreign affairs undersecretary, and Gen. Jesus Vargas, who had been dismissed by Garcia as secretary of defense.

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None of them won. Part of the reason, Smith said, was that his million-peso budget (\$250,000) wouldn't go far enough. It didn't leave enough money for printing sample ballots, "the key to obtaining the kind of vote-swapping deals" that won senatorial elections.

Smith said he also had to give \$50,000 to Macapagal, a man who had been furnishing the CIA station with "political information through a deep-cover agent for a number of years."

The "grand alliance" was a failure. Marcos came in first in the Senate race, topping the list by garnering almost 300,000 votes more than the second-place winner.

As the years went on and Marcos' political stock continued to rise, the U.S. government got "very much in bed with him," Smith said. Marcos was elected president in 1965, ousting Macapagal after a single term. He won reelection once, then declared martial law in 1972.